Title: 'Vengeance is Mine': Retribution in select fiction on the Indian 'Mutiny' of 1857

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Synopsis

The Rebellion of 1857 in colonial India, which was popularly known in the nineteenth century as the 'Sepoy Mutiny' or just the Mutiny, has inspired more novels in English than any other historical event of the nineteenth century. The fictionalized accounts of the events in India started appearing as soon as the military resistance of the rebels waned giving way to the restoration of the British administration. The suppression of the rebellion brought new legitimacy and 'sonority' to the British in India. According to Gautam Chakraborty:

> And to that extent, the Mutiny, as the rebellion came to be known, required a continuous commemoration from the faithful, an imperial thanksgiving never entirely without a trace of incredulity, and signifying always a caesural moment in the history of the Indian empire—replete with signs and wonders, …--when all was nearly lost only to be regained once more, and when, more prosaically perhaps, the formal imperialism of the Crown and the Parliament replaced a hundred years of the East India Company's expansion and rule. (2006, 4)

The fictions on the Mutiny became available to the English-reading public when the air was rife with cry for vengeance on the part of the British. Three examples will suffice.

> On 22nd August 1857, Punch was running a full-page cartoon, ''The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger'' showing India having killed a helpless woman and child, the lion of England leaping onto the tiger in revenge.
>
> Martin Tupper, often called ''the English poet of the rebellion'' reflects the domestic British attitude of vengeance and fury: ''Who pulls about the mercy? – the agonized wail of babies hewn piecemeal yet sickens the air''(qtd in S. B. Chaudhuri 259).

In December 1857 issue of *Household Words*, Charles Dickens writes:

> I wish I were a commander in chief in India. The first thing I would do to strike the Oriental race with such amusement to mean that I should do my almost to exterminate the race upon whom the stain of the late atrocities rested.

But there were also others who believed that such vengeance is unjustly pursued at the cost of an exaggeration of the stories of atrocities suffered by the whites in India. Engels, reporting for the

NewYork Daily Tribune ,on June 4, 1858 strongly criticized the British soldiers rampaging the Indian towns in the name of suppressing mutinies :

> The Kalmuk hordes of Genghis khan and Timur, falling upon a city like a swarm of locusts, and devouring everything that came in their way, must have been a blessing to a country, compared with the irruption of these Christian, civilized, chivalrous and gentle British soldiers. The former, at least, soon passed away on their erratic course; but these methodic Englishmen bring along with them their prize-agents, who convert loot into a system, who register the plunder, sell it by auction, and keep a sharp look-out that British heroism is not defrauded of a title of its reward. We shall watch with curiosity the capabilities of this army, relaxed as its discipline is by the effects of a wholesale plunder, at a time when the fatigues of a hot weather campaign require the greatest stringency of discipline (Marx and Engels 134-135).

Writing a decade later BholanathChunder described these bloodthirsty agents of retributive justice in the following manner:

> It mattered little to whom the red-coats [the British officers] killed, the innocent and the guilty, the loyal and the disloyal, the well-wisher and the traitor, were confounded in a promiscuous vengeance. To 'bag the nigger' had become a favourite phrase of the military sportsman of the day. Peafowls, partridges, and Pandies rose together, but the latter gave the best sport. (from*The Travels of a Hindoo etc.* (1869) qtd. In Andrew Ward 672).

In India such vengeful atrocities perpetrated by the British raised the voices of the educated intelligentsia, who while protesting against the British atrocities, was also keen in distancing themselves from the 'foolish'* rebels and begging for clemency and moderation. While the atrocities suffered by the British were weighed against the uncontrolled retribution that followed the Crown took over India on November, 1858. But even before the Crown formally intervened to guarantee the safety and security of all its subjects in India, the then Governor General Lord Canning adopted a policy to control and contain the vengeful, and often corrupt, British officials, since July 31, 1857. A dogged avowal of his policy earned him the nickname 'Clemency Canning', as he was ridiculed in the *Punch* cartoon (Mclagan 137). Canning's 'clemency' was a myth as he was only being practical and far-sighted in following his policy of moderation. While taking the Indian public opinion into account he was wise enough to see:

> Bengal is still without a single European soldier. . . and in Bengal we are still dependant (mainly) upon the goodwill (I cannot say affection) of the natives. Suppose (not an impossibility, although I hope not a likelihood), suppose that hostilities trail on, and that we do not make

> our way with Oude, and other disturbed places – that our strength becomes a subject of doubt – will it not be the part of a wise Government to keep such a population as that of the three great Lower Provinces in a loyal frame of temper? Can you do so if you proscribe and scout untrustworthy whole classes? (letter dated December, 1857; qtdinMaclagan 139).

The English novels on the Mutiny, written and published between 1857 and 1910, (in fact, till 1947) were undoubtedly targeting a Euro-American readership. GautamChakravarty writes:

> Foregrounding history with far greater political(? Cultural) investment than most novels of the Anglo-Indian domesticity, the Mutiny novel reworks antecedent and metropolitan literary idioms to represent indigenous resistance, and in so doing serves for a time as the potent medium of popular imperialism and jingoism. (2006, 16)

In the present study of some the Mutiny novels, I propose to look into, how these texts, as 'mediums of popular imperialism and jingoism', negotiate with the issues of the so called justified vengeance of the popular imagination, and the strategic amnesty for the consolidation of the British rule in India.The study reveals that the atrocities perpetrated by the Indians are often prominently described in the novels like *First Love and Last Love* (1868), while the graphic display of ruthlessness on the part of the British counter-insurgency operations are deliberately downplayed. Yet, there is also a projection of interpersonal bonding between the British officials and the Indians who are lawful and just, as we find in *Seeta* (1872) or *Rujub the Juggler* (1876). The novels also offer a critique of the British administration in India, and as cautionary tales, suggest and advocate the proper degree of astuteness, integrity and moderation on the part of the colonial officials and militia, as we find in novels like *TheDilemma*(1876) and *Flotsam*(1896). In doing so, the novels, thus, take a stand on the issue of clemency and amnesty towards the rebels and Indians in general.

In pitting the English domestic life against the crisis in India the Mutiny novels seem to arrive at an aporetic end. In their failure to suggest the possibility of a 'meaningful' English life in India, the novels affirm that the Empire *is* and will always remain a crisis especially for the domestic life. The Empire is a mission, an adventure, an expedition which can be successful only with the return of the imperial protagonists, back to the imperial centre: the home in Britain, as Cyril Brandon does in *Seeta,* or as Jim Douglas settles down with Kate in the end *On the Face of Waters.*

It is also to be noted that subsumed within this discourse is the presentation Western and the Indian women, whose 'honour' and its defilement constitute the mainstay in the logic of vengeance. The novels, through their repeated reconstruction and representations of what happened in 1857-59, prove to be greatly anamnestic (e.g. *The Masque of Mutiny,* 1947). Like the Rebellion itself, the Mutiny novels defy closure fail to achieve amnesty. Instead of healing, they open up the

wound every time they attempt to narrate; their discourse running parallel to the indigenous socio-political movements in India, like the Indigo Rebellion, the Ilbert Bill Movement, defiance of the Arms Act, and the emergence of a strong nationalist sentiment.

Proposed Chapter Division:

Ch.1 Introduction & definition of the terms

Ch.2 Review of existing studies on Mutiny novels. (the research gap is to be identified)

Ch.3 'Scourge of God': Vengeance and the Crisis of Heroism

Ch.4 'Putting the House in Order': Vengeance and the Crisis of the Family

Ch.5 'Bag the Nigger': Vengeance and the Crisis of Ethnicity

Ch.6 'To Forgive, but not to forget': Vengeance and the (im)possibility of Closure

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